

Changing, Out-of-Work, Dead, and Reborn Gods in the Fiction of Neil Gaiman

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Introduction

English author of speculative fiction Neil Gaiman is fascinated by American culture, both highbrow and lowbrow, and has often chosen to explore it by considering its expressions of spirituality and religion, both high and low. In his graphic series, *The Sandman*, and more recently in the novels *American Gods* and *Anansi Boys*, Gaiman has pondered what happens to gods when they change, when they are made redundant, and if they die. For students of religion one interesting issue is how he defines ‘gods’ in the first place, and this paper will consider a number of these definitions, examining *Sandman* in greater detail, and surveying *American Gods* and *Anansi Boys* for comparison.¹

Neil Gaiman: Biographical Sketch

Born in 1960, Neil Gaiman is of Polish Jewish ancestry. His grandfather migrated to England from Holland in 1916 and established a chain of grocery stores (he was also an acquaintance of Lord Cohen, founder of the Tesco chain of supermarkets), changing the family name from ‘Chaiman’ to ‘Gaiman’. Neil’s parents moved away from his grandfather and the family business, opening their own grocery store and converting to Scientology in the early 1960s.² In 1969 his father David was involved in the attempted take-over of mental health charity the National Association for Mental Health (now ‘Mind’) by Church of Scientology members, who stacked the meeting and nominated him as chairman. They were ultimately unsuccessful, but the ensuing scandal

¹ I have chosen not to include the eschatological novel *Good Omens* co-authored by Terry Pratchett, as disentangling the two voices is too complex for this brief paper: Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman, *Good Omens* (London: Gollancz, 1990).

² Neil Gaiman, ‘The Interview’, in *Prince of Stories: The Many Worlds of Neil Gaiman*, Hank Wagner, Christopher Golden and Stephen R. Bissette (New York: St Martin’s Press, 2008), pp. 445-451.

catapulted the Church into the media spotlight.³ As a result Neil was asked to withdraw his enrolment from Fonthill School, as the headmaster noted that the Church of Scientology was being described as “socially harmful”.⁴ This and the other schools he attended were ostensibly Anglican in cast, but Neil’s family did not cast off all Jewish trappings.

In 1973 Neil underwent his *bar mitzvah*, and it was at this point that cantor Reb Meyer Lev introduced him to Jewish mythology.⁵ Gaiman was to revisit this mythology with his contribution to an anthology of comics retelling some of the more colourful episodes from the Old Testament (he tackled *Judges* 19).⁶ This was recently reprinted in a volume where it appeared alongside contributions by Richard Dawkins and other prominent atheists.⁷ This should not be seen as evidence of Gaiman being an atheist, however, as the introduction disclaims “bear in mind that no contributor necessarily agrees with the other contributors ... inclusion is not an indication of collusion”.⁸ Indeed, despite Gaiman’s popularity among detail-hungry web users and the existence of several books devoted to him, little is known about his personal religious beliefs.⁹ This is especially surprising given that he has kept a well-tended online journal since 2001.¹⁰ Since the presentation of this paper in September 2008, David Gaiman passed away on 7 March 2009 and was given a Jewish funeral service,¹¹ at which his only son Neil said the *kaddish*.¹²

³ Cecil Hewitt Rolph, *Believe What You Like: What Happened Between the Scientologists and the National Association for Mental Health* (London: Andre Deutsch Ltd, 1973).

⁴ Anon., ‘Head Bars Son Of Cult Man’, *The Times* (13 August, 1968), p. 2.

⁵ ‘The Gaiman Timeline’, in *Prince of Stories*, p. 519.

⁶ Neil Gaiman, ‘Journey to Bethlehem’, in *Outrageous Tales from the Old Testament*, ed. Tony Bennett (Knockabout Comics, 1987).

⁷ Russ Kick (ed.), *Everything You Know About God is Wrong: The Disinformation Guide to Religion* (New York: The Disinformation Company Inc, 2007).

⁸ Russ Kick ‘Introduction’, in *Everything You Know About God is Wrong: The Disinformation Guide to Religion*, ed. Russ Kick (New York: The Disinformation Company Inc, 2007), p. 7.

⁹ Besides Wagner, Golden and Bissette, *Prince of Stories*, written by acquaintances of his, focussing on his career and compiled from interviews; there is only Joe McCabe, *Hanging Out With the Dream King: Conversations with Neil Gaiman and His Collaborators* (Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 2004); Steven P. Olson, *Neil Gaiman* (New York: Rosen Publishing Group, 2005), written by one of the authors of *Prince of Stories* and focussing on his career in comics; and Darrell Schweitzer (ed.), *The Neil Gaiman Reader* (Rockville MD: Wildside Press, 2007). A Gaiman biography *per se* has yet to be written.

¹⁰ Neil Gaiman, *Neil Gaiman’s Journal*, at <http://journal.neilgaiman.com>. Accessed 25/12/09.

¹¹ Anon., ‘Hundreds Attend Memorial Service for East Grinstead Businessman’, *East Grinstead Courier and Observer* (17 March, 2009), at

As a boy Gaiman read lots of classic fantasy and science-fiction: Lord Dunsany, H. P. Lovecraft, Tolkien, Ursula Le Guin, G. K. Chesterton and C. S. Lewis. On Lewis he later recalled:

For good or ill the religious allegory, such as it was, went entirely over my head, and it was not until I was about twelve that I found myself realising that there were Certain Parallels... I was personally offended: I felt that an author, whom I had trusted, had had a hidden agenda. I had nothing against religion, or religion in fiction... My upset was, I think, that it made less of Narnia for me, it made it less interesting a thing, less interesting a place.¹³

These objections did not, however, stop the Narnia books igniting a passionate love of writing. Gaiman recalls:

C.S. Lewis was the first person to make me want to be a writer. He made me aware of the writer, that there was someone standing behind the words, that there was someone telling the story. I fell in love with the way he used parentheses – the auctorial asides that were both wise and chatty, and I rejoiced in using such brackets in my own essays and compositions through the rest of my childhood.

When he reached his twenties he pursued journalistic writing, establishing numerous literary contacts along the way. After having a short story published in a magazine devoted to the role-playing game *Dungeons and Dragons*,¹⁴ Gaiman published his first book: a biography of rock band Duran Duran.¹⁵

He was fortunate enough to make the acquaintance of comic book author Alan Moore, and got a job at DC Comics writing for the relaunched series *Black Orchid*.¹⁶ It was under their imprint Vertigo Comics that he published his comic *Sandman* from late 1989-1996. Gaiman was anxious to revive this rather minor superhero character from the 1970s, co-created by comic luminary Jack Kirby who had already had a hand in the creation of characters such as the Fantastic Four, Captain America, the X-Men and the

<http://www.thisissussex.co.uk/eastgrinstead/news/eastgrinstead/Hundreds-attend-memorial-service-East-Grinstead-businessman/article-776519-detail/article.html>. Accessed 25/12/09.

¹² Neil Gaiman 'Long weekend', *Neil Gaiman's Journal* (14 March, 2009)

<http://journal.neilgaiman.com/2009/03/long-weekend.html>. Accessed 25/12/09.

¹³ Neil Gaiman 'Mythcon 35 Author Guest of Honor Speech', *Mythprint* (October 2004). This speech was on the website of the Mythopoeic Society, but has been removed. See Internet Archive

<http://web.archive.org/web/20070610192935/http://www.mythsoc.org/gaiman.htm>. Accessed 25/12/09.

¹⁴ Neil Gaiman, 'Featherquest', *Imagine: Adventure Games Magazine* vol. 14 (1984).

¹⁵ Neil Gaiman, *Duran Duran: The First Four Years of the Fab Five* (New York: Proteus Publication Co, 1994).

¹⁶ Neil Gaiman *Black Orchid*, #1-3 (DC Comics, 1988).

Hulk. The 1970s *Sandman* was a children's comic that featured the exploits of an apparently ordinary man who could enter the dreams of people, where he had superpowers. His main concern was protecting children from nightmares, and the comic only lasted seven issues. Originally, however, the character was intended to be the actual Sandman of folklore, both immortal and eternal. Gaiman took up this intention with his revival of *Sandman*, although his version must be considered a completely new character. This Sandman is usually referred to simply as 'Dream', although in historical flashbacks he is often known by other names, most often 'Morpheus'.¹⁷

Gaiman and the Gods Part 1: *Sandman*

Sandman was something of a watershed for the world of comics. Its mature themes quickly garnered it a substantial cult following, and, for the first time, women made up a significant portion of a comic's readership: fifty percent were female, and many of them were well into their twenties.¹⁸ Gaiman had conceived of the series as running for a finite amount of time, rather than the more open-ended runs of other popular comics (by its end it was outselling DC stablemate *Superman*), and over the seven years of its publication he produced seventy-five issues. Gaiman was to remain the sole author of *Sandman* for its entire run, which was also unusual for a comic book series. The initial conception of the series has been summed up by Gaiman as, "The king of dreams learns one must change or die and then makes his decision".¹⁹ In Gaiman's conception of the Sandman, he resurrected the intention that the original Sandman character was eternal, and created a family of seven eternal siblings, the 'Endless', to whom Dream belonged. He resurrected another obscure DC character as the eldest brother, Destiny, and created their siblings Death, Delirium (formerly Delight), Desire, Despair, and Destruction. Some commentators have noted that the Endless are "ancient beings, predating the concept of godhood", but it is my contention that in the sense of Dream's power and endlessness he can be considered a god, although this is a contentious interpretation.²⁰

The story arc of Gaiman's *Sandman* is divided into ten major chapters (each collected into and reprinted as separate volumes), and when we first meet

¹⁷ Morpheus, the son of Hypnos (Sleep), is the Classical Greek god of dreams. Stephen L. Harris and Gloria Platzner, *Classical Mythology: Images and Insights*, 2nd edition (Mountain View CA: Mayfield Publishing Company, 1998), p. 210.

¹⁸ Wagner, Golden and Bissette, *Prince of Stories*, p. 30.

¹⁹ Neil Gaiman, 'Introduction' to *The Sandman: The Dream Hunters* (Vertigo Comics, 1999).

²⁰ Wagner, Golden and Bissette, *Prince of Stories*, p. 60.

him he has been imprisoned for seventy-two years by a magician whose characterisation is substantially based on Aleister Crowley. This magician originally sought to summon Death whom he intended to kill and free the world from mortality, but accidentally summoned her brother Dream instead. The magician tries to force Dream to grant him immortality, but Dream refuses and waits until the magician dies. The magician's son does not release Dream either, but when the guards of his prison break the circle binding his prison and are then foolish enough to fall asleep in his presence, he is able to manipulate them to free him.²¹ The subsequent issues are concerned with the retrieval of his dispersed totems of power: a pouch of sand, his helm (which resembles a World War Two gas mask) and a magical gem that powered his realm, the Dreaming. This realm is in disarray, and he must both reorder it and make amends with its inhabitants. The limits of this article do not permit the description of the Dreaming here in much detail, but it is ripe with interesting characters such as storybook versions of a malevolently intelligent Cain and his moronic brother Abel, whom he murders on a regular basis. To retrieve his helm Dream must visit Hell and challenge a demon to take repossession of it. Lucifer, lord of Hell, tells Dream they will not allow him to leave, and that he has no power in Hell. Dream reminds Lucifer that Hell is powerless unless its inhabitants can dream of Heaven. Furious, Lucifer allows Dream to pass, but vows to destroy him.²²

The following volume concerns Dream's location and recapture of rogue dreams who had escaped his realm during his captivity, including Fiddler's Green, which is able to embody itself in a form that bears no small resemblance to G. K. Chesterton. There is also the Corinthian, "a nightmare created to be the darkness, and the fear of darkness in every human heart. A black mirror, made to reflect everything about itself that humanity will not confront". The Corinthian is not fulfilling his purpose, and Dream tracks him down to what appears to be a "cereal convention" but turns out instead to be convention for *serial* killers.²³ Dream uncreates him only to recreate him later, and more successfully, as this Corinthian is much more well-adjusted (as well-adjusted as a being with mouths for eyes can be expected to be, anyway).²⁴

The remainder of the series deals mostly with Dream's wanderings across the earth encountering old lovers and enemies, through whom we are sometimes afforded glimpses of his past. We witness the first performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, before an audience comprised of the real Titania,

²¹ Neil Gaiman *The Sandman*, #1 (Vertigo Comics, January 1989).

²² Gaiman, *Sandman*, #4 (April 1989).

²³ Gaiman, *Sandman*, #14 (April 1990).

²⁴ Gaiman, *Sandman*, #61 (July 1994).

Oberon and Puck and other citizens of the often sinister world of Faerie, who are visiting this realm for the last time (although Puck hides and remains).²⁵ Dream also travels once more to Hell to forgive an old lover, Nada, whom he had imprisoned there. This woman had been queen of an African city of glass in Africa's remote past. She had made love to Dream only to have the Sun show its disapproval of this union between mortal and immortal by destroying her city.²⁶ Dream then asked her to join him in the Dreaming as his queen but she refused, remorseful over the deaths of her people and knowing that their romance was doomed. He punished her by imprisonment in Hell until he could forgive her this betrayal of the heart. During his trip to Hell in Volume One to retrieve his helm, Dream confessed that while he still loved Nada he could not yet forgive her.²⁷ Commenting on this Wagner, Golden and Bissette made the observation that this behaviour "seems unsurprising from one of the Endless as compared to the gods of legend".²⁸ In Volume 4, Dream's sister, Desire, upbraids him for abandoning Nada to torment these last ten thousand years (she had secretly caused the two to fall in love in the first place), and his elder sister Death, whose opinion he respects, agrees.²⁹ He travels to Hell to release her and, indeed, the cold, distant figure of the early issues and whom the characters Dream meets vividly recall slowly softens over the course of the series, becoming increasingly humane and human.

Dream finds Hell empty, and discovers that Lucifer has relinquished rulership. Tired of playing the part of antagonist assigned to him by the Creator, Lucifer has decided to leave the game altogether. This theme is echoed in the case of the ghosts of two schoolboys who debate the nature of the Hell they are temporarily excused from. One believes that Hell is of people's own making, mirroring the basis of Lucifer's decision. The other believes that Hell is a real place, but no-one need stay there forever.³⁰ Lucifer leaves the key to Hell in Dream's care as punishment for the loss of face Dream caused him previously.³¹ This instigates a dangerous game of one-upmanship among the other rulers of Hell and an assortment of representatives from pagan pantheons begin to court Dream and seek ownership. These include Odin and Loki from the Norse pantheon, who wish to hide safely in Hell until Ragnarok destroys Asgard in their absence. Another deity who appears is the Japanese Susano-o-

²⁵ Gaiman, *Sandman*, #19 (September 1990).

²⁶ Gaiman, *Sandman*, #9 (September 1989).

²⁷ Gaiman, *Sandman*, #4 (April 1989).

²⁸ Wagner, Golden and Bissette, *Prince of Stories*, p. 60.

²⁹ Gaiman, *Sandman*, #21 (November 1990).

³⁰ Gaiman, *Sandman*, #25 (March 1990).

³¹ Gaiman, *Sandman*, #23 (January 1991).

no-Mikoto, storm god and brother of Amaterasu the queen of the Japanese pantheon and patroness of the imperial family.³² Susano-o-no-Mikoto does not represent his pantheon, however, but a clan composed of orphaned and forgotten gods, and even an apotheosised Marilyn Monroe.³³ Dream ends up giving the key to a pair of angels who claim that, as a creation of God, Heaven should own it.³⁴ The reader is clearly intended to ruminate on God's role in bringing Hell into existence, but also, more importantly, our own role in attributing importance to it by fearing it.

Another key episode is in Volume Seven when Dream's younger sister Delirium (formerly Delight) requests his help in searching for their missing brother, Destruction.³⁵ To find him they employ the services of Mr Farrell, a travel agent who was once the god Pharamond.³⁶ They consult a range of Destruction's associates, including his former lover the Babylonian goddess Ishtar who, deprived of a proper cult, works as a stripper, eliciting a baser worship from her customers. Her meeting with the Endless reminds her of lost glories and she makes an interesting observation about gods: beginning as dreams, they take on reality and are worshipped. "And then one day there's no one left to worship. And in the end, each little god and goddess takes its first journey back into dreams. And what comes after, not even we know". After they leave she gives one last, spectacular performance before exploding in a flash of light that takes the whole club with her.³⁷ Eventually Dream is forced to consult his son Orpheus, who was left nothing more than a decapitated head after he pursued his dead wife Eurydice to Hades in spite of Dream's warning, and was torn apart by the Bacchae.³⁸ An immortal, this did not kill him, and Dream left him in the care of a small cult on a Greek island for several millennia. He agrees to provide an oracle giving the location of Destruction on the condition that Dream grants him death.³⁹ Dream obliges, and this is ultimately to be his undoing.⁴⁰

Dream's brother Destruction, an affable, red-headed giant of a man, has relinquished his duties as the principle of destruction in the cosmos, believing that humanity no longer require his services. Here we should recall Gaiman's description of the series as representing a decision on the part of Dream: that

³² Juliet Piggott, *Japanese Mythology* (London: Paul Hamlyn, 1969), pp. 15-16.

³³ Gaiman, *Sandman*, #24 (February 1991).

³⁴ Gaiman, *Sandman*, #27 (May 1991).

³⁵ Gaiman, *Sandman*, #42 (October 1992).

³⁶ Gaiman, *Sandman*, #43 (November 1992).

³⁷ Gaiman, *Sandman*, #45 (January 1993).

³⁸ Harris and Platzner, *Classical Mythology: Images and Insights*, pp. 216-218.

³⁹ Gaiman, *Sandman*, #47 (March 1993).

⁴⁰ Gaiman, *Sandman*, #49 (May 1993).

he must change or die. In *Delirium* we are presented with a figure who has changed from *Delight* (although we are never told why), and in *Destruction* we see a figure who has similarly embraced change. *Dream*, however, seems too loyal to commitment to truly embrace the changes that are affecting him. *Destruction* departs into the stars and *Dream* and *Delirium* go their separate ways.⁴¹

The penultimate volume concerns *Lyta Hall*, a woman whose baby son had gestated while she was in the *Dreaming*, making *Dream* consider it his. When the baby is kidnapped she blames *Dream*, and when *Lyta* believes him to have been murdered she invokes the *Three Furies*, who have the right to claim *Dream's* life as a kin-slayer.⁴² These *Three Furies* have appeared throughout *Sandman* in different guises: the *Three Fates*, *Three Witches*, and so on, although this is their most powerful and deadly incarnation. The child is not dead, however, but has been kidnapped by *Puck* and the Norse trickster god *Loki*, who still smarts over his and *Odin's* lost opportunity to rule *Hell*.⁴³ Many previous characters of the series reappear in this volume: *Odin* and representatives of the realm of *Faerie* sniff around the *Dreaming*, and its denizens and *Death* compel *Dream* to flee the *Furies*; to leave his post as *Destruction* did. *Dream* reveals that he cannot, however, and *Death*, who knows her brother's dedication to duty, agrees. She takes his hand and he departs with her to her realm. The abducted child, *Daniel*, whom *Dream* finally *did* claim as his own, is reborn as the new *Dream*. The final volume is a wake for the dead *Dream*, and nearly all of the characters introduced over the course of the series make a reappearance to eulogise and remember him.⁴⁴ In the face of change, *Dream*, one of the *Endless* and billions of years old, chose death.

Gaiman and the Gods Part 2: *American Gods* and *Anansi Boys*

American Gods is a novel by Gaiman that tells the story of *Shadow*, a convict who is released from prison a few days early because his wife has died in a car crash with his best friend.⁴⁵ Out of work, because that friend had promised him a job, he meets *Mr Wednesday*, a mysterious old con-man who hires *Shadow* to be his bodyguard as he travels across America (the novel is one big 'road trip'), visiting a series of acquaintances. *Shadow* practices the magic tricks he had taught himself in prison from a book given to him by his fellow in-mate,

⁴¹ Gaiman, *Sandman*, #48 (April 1993).

⁴² Gaiman, *Sandman*, #63 (September, 1994).

⁴³ Gaiman, *Sandman*, #59 (April 1994) and *Sandman*, #65 (December 1994).

⁴⁴ Gaiman, *Sandman*, #70-75 (August 1995-March 1996).

⁴⁵ Neil Gaiman, *American Gods: The Author's Preferred Text* (London: Hill House, 2004 [2001]).

Low-Key Lyesmith, a fount of street-wise information whose advice is revealed as increasingly relevant as the story progresses.

Shadow's magic tricks equip him well to deal with Wednesday's acquaintances who, as it turns out, are all gods or creatures from fairy tales. More correctly, they are American manifestations of supernatural figures from the Old World. Mr Wednesday himself is revealed to be the American manifestation of Odin, first of the Old World gods to reach the New World on a ship of Viking explorers.⁴⁶ Other characters include: Mad Sweeney, the tall, brawling Irishman who turns out to be a leprechaun; an old Russian man revealed as Czernobog, the pagan Slavic god of darkness, who plays Shadow at Draughts and wins the right to slay him as a sacrifice at the end of the novel; Mr Jacquel, a small-town embalmer who is actually Anubis; and Mr Nancy, a sharply-dressed old man from the West Indies who is Anansi the spider, the West African and Caribbean trickster god. These characters are all down on their luck to some degree, generally wear shabby clothing and get by through a combination of doing odd jobs and perpetrating small-time cons. Peppered throughout the book are unconnected stories, such as that of Salim, an Arabian *djinn* who works as a cab driver in New York and steals the identity of a man he picks up as a cab fare and subsequently seduces; and Bilquis, a vestige of the apotheosised Queen of Sheba who works as a prostitute and is literally a man-eater.

In a situation reminiscent of Susano-o-no-Mikoto's recruitment of orphaned gods in *Sandman*, Wednesday is recruiting these old gods for a war that is brewing between themselves and a sinister group of figures who are revealed as the new gods of America. These gods are embodiments of such modern day ephemera as the media and the internet, and they manifest their power in the world with vast expenditures of money and shadowy agents in dark suits. They are not interested in traditional worship, however. As their leader, Mr World, says, "religion is an operating system and prayers are just so much fucking spam".⁴⁷

The new gods murder Wednesday and Shadow crucifies himself as part of a death vigil that allows him insight into the matters at hand. He realises he is Wednesday's son Balder, and that Wednesday has been colluding all along with Mr World, who is in fact Low-Key Lyesmith or Loki 'Liesmith'. The gods Anubis and Thoth guide him through the afterlife and the goddess Eostre brings him back to life. The titanic battle that Wednesday and Loki instigated between old and new gods was orchestrated so that Wednesday would be

⁴⁶ Edward O. G. Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1964), pp. 35-74.

⁴⁷ Gaiman, *American Gods*, p. 59.

restored by the power of so many gods' deaths and that Loki could feed on the chaos, restoring them to their former glory. Shadow manages to stop the battle before too many gods are slain, and suggests that all should go home to whatever they can get. America, Shadow suggests, "is a bad land for gods".⁴⁸ He concludes his speech by saying, "I think I would rather be a man than a god. We don't need anyone to believe in us. We just keep going anyhow. It's what we do".⁴⁹

Gaiman insists that *Anansi Boys* was actually conceived before *American Gods* but, while it indeed concerns a character common to both novels, Mr Nancy, it should not really be considered either as a sequel or prequel to that novel.⁵⁰ The story begins with the death of Mr Nancy in Florida; his son 'Fat' Charlie Nancy is introduced to the reader as an awkward young man in London who must briefly leave his respectable life to attend the funeral. Florida reminds Charlie of all sorts of unpleasantness from his childhood and his father's constant ridicule of him, including the bestowal of the nickname 'Fat' Charlie despite the fact he had no more puppy fat than any other child. When 'Fat' Charlie's father said something like that, however, it stuck for some reason. Charlie had spent most of his life terminally embarrassed by his father, and as a result had not told his English fiancée Rosie much about him at all. Mr Nancy died doing what he loved most, flirting with young women in a karaoke bar. While in Florida Charlie spends time with his stern old neighbour Mrs Higgle, who informs him that his father was in fact the spider god Anansi and, further, that he has a brother. If Charlie ever wants to meet him, he has only to ask a spider. The respectable and rational Charlie returns to England having resolved to forget the revelation, although when drunk one night he indeed makes such a request of a spider. Sure enough, the next morning a tall, handsome, sharply-dressed man turns up professing to be Charlie's brother. They look similar, but Spider, as he is named, is more confident, more magnetic. He is unaware of their father's death, and insists that they celebrate his life with an evening of wine, women and song. Spider has all sorts of magical powers: the ability to distort space, conjure objects from thin air, and to travel anywhere at will. They are all based on his confidence and ability to conceive of and tell a good story; which also explains the profound creative powers of Mr Nancy's nicknaming of Charlie.

The next day Charlie oversleeps as he is hungover, and Spider impersonates him at his workplace. Charlie wakes up next to Daisy, a woman who certainly isn't his fiancée, but this does not stop him from being intensely

⁴⁸ Gaiman, *American Gods*, p. 582.

⁴⁹ Gaiman, *American Gods*, p. 584.

⁵⁰ Neil Gaiman, *Anansi Boys* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005).

jealous when Spider proves to be something of a nuisance and begins to take over Charlie's life. Spider himself is envious of Charlie's life, even seducing his fiancée Rosie, whom Charlie had not yet slept with. Things go from bad to worse, and in desperation Charlie returns to Florida to beg Mrs Higgle's advice on how to get rid of Spider. With three of her friends (reminiscent of the *Sandman's* Three), she sends Charlie to the beginning of the world. This consists of a string of caves along a beach, each inhabited by various beasts. Charlie meets many friends and enemies of his father, such as the dreaded Tiger, but no-one who will help him until he meets Bird, who agrees to get rid of Spider in exchange for Anansi's bloodline. Charlie agrees, and back in London, Spider finds himself mysteriously attacked by birds. It gradually emerges that Bird wants to claim both Spider and Charlie for their father's old enemy: Tiger. They end their sibling rivalry and band together just before Spider is abducted. Charlie finally extracts the truth from Mrs Higgle; after a particularly mischievous childhood stunt, she and her friends had performed a ritual on him that had separated his divine deviousness from the human, thus creating Spider out of Charlie.

Charlie gains the confidence needed to inherit the divinity of his father, and is able to rescue Spider through a combination of clever story-telling and bravery or, more accurately, confidence. The novel is satisfactorily concluded with Spider marrying Rosie and Charlie Daisy. Spider has become more sedate and sedentary, but Charlie discovers his secret passion – music – and becomes a moderately successful singer. He and Daisy even have a baby.

Conclusion

This remarkably optimistic coda to Gaiman's journey of divine retirement is most salient for the purpose of this article. What began in *Sandman* as the sad, if not nihilistic, end of a character of poetry and pathos, metamorphosed into the charming shabbiness of the out-of-work gods in *American Gods*. *Anansi Boys*, however, begins with a divine death, but ends with not only a literal birth (of Charlie and Daisy's child), but with a definite kind of rebirth. The divine is neither eradicated nor eclipsed; rather, as it is no longer opposed to the profane, it is given a new lease of life as the quality that enhances the ordinary and infuses the everyday with magic.